



JOSHUA CLOVER 2018-12-23

## FIVE NOTES ON THE YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT

NONPOLITICS GILET JAUNES, RIOT

### Number One: It's a Riot

Not the few urban episodes of fighting cops and looting shops but the whole thing. The national movement arose after President Emmanuel Macron imposed a fuel premium, supposedly to drive the transition from France's diesel-centric automotive life to more ecologically sound practices. If you believe that, I have a *pont* to sell you. Given that Macron had recently enacted a substantial tax break for the wealthy, and given that he is literally a sack of 50-euro notes wearing a smart necktie, believing him was not really an option. Meanwhile, communal refusal when people cannot afford a necessary market good has a long tradition. The technical name is "price-setting," and historically it helps define a riot, most famously the bread riots that typified the medieval and early modern period in Europe. Over and over it features a demand that the price of the good in question be lowered so people can survive, and persistently features the blockage of transport to assert power over the marketplace. The Gilets Jaunes movement is a modern bread riot.

### Number Two: It's Lowkey a Civil War

A main shared characteristic of participants may well be hostility to business as usual, which is to say, politics as usual. Certainly it begins from an economic demand. It is striking how swiftly and creatively it moved toward a broad set of demands both economic and political, with Macron's resignation predictably at the top. The remainder intimate both progressive and reactionary political visions (France out of Africa on the one hand, strong immigration controls on the other). The movement has sustained itself longer than anyone supposed, after Macron yielded on the gas tax, after he offered modest increases in the minimum wage. Even when it dissolves, its energies will still be present. If we lived in a world where the psychic life of politics was not dominated by the electoral pantomime, we could hope for a real challenge to the rule of capital. We can hope regardless. Likely there will be a tedious hustle to canalize the movement's denizens and dynamics toward the next elections—with a real risk that the national chauvinists of Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* will most successfully lay claim to the politics of pretending to hate politics. This is why there is, as there must be, a struggle within the struggle, a sort of low-key civil war internal to the movement itself about what it will end up meaning. It is for this reason those who know that state authority or a new compact with capital will not save anyone, radicals and militants who may have kept their distance from a movement with reactionary

elements, might wish to fight over its direction from within.

### Number Three: Immigration and Ecology Are One Fist

As we have noted here previously, the matter of immigration, border controls, and maneuverings to manage one with the other—that fetid nexus we call nationalism—increasingly orients political debate in Fortress Europe just as in the US and UK. The initial plaint of the Gilets Jaunes regarding the gas tax has no obvious connection to immigration control but discovers it as a demand almost instantly, a demand for an authoritarian state driven by the alignment of xenophobia and opportunism. At the same time, the novelty of Macron's gas tax lies in the appropriation of ecological discourse to further immiserate and discipline citizens. In this convergence of command over borders and command over climate concerns as a way to centralize state power, we might recognize the contours of something like “green nationalism,” wherein a rhetoric of protecting natural resources becomes the basis for centralized power toward the dream of a walled ethnostate, in a world where climate refugees are ever more common. No one in search of a sustainable ecosystem and/or human flourishing can allow this to happen.

### Number Four: They Don't Want to Talk

As with every movement, this one features a proliferation of speeches, demands, signage, self-appointed spokespersons, and the like. That said, the gains they have already won—did we mention the tax rollback and the minimum wage? not to mention the dramatic weakening of Macron's technocratic regime—were not gotten via appeals to conscience, or reason, or anything else. The gains were won because they blocked traffic, flipped Porsches, fought cops, laid siege to the Arc de Triomphe, and made the shopping districts of shimmering cities unshoppable. Some people will tell you that the lesson here is “protest works.” But *protest* was the millions and millions marching against the resumption of the Gulf War or against Trump. The difference between picking up blazing cars with forklifts so as to smash them into tollbooths and protest is that the first option has a better track record.

### Number Five: Every Serious Movement Is a Sundial

taken from here Among the demands, one stands out, not as the most dangerous but the most absurd: *réindustrialization de la France*. Why not ask for a return to three-fourths of the laboring population employed in agriculture, as France offered in 1500? Not to get too far into the weeds, but productivity advances don't really go backward, as purchasers will just buy from a more efficient source who can sell at lower cost. Productivity advances mean that eventually employment leaves that sector, as jobs get automated away. To reindustrialize France in the way the Gilets Jaunes envision, you would literally have to end capitalism. Which, if we have ended capitalism, maybe factory work could fuck right off? But I digress. Despite the demands, one of the things that a national riot over market prices (rather than wages) tells us is that industrial labor, the basis for France's historically mighty CGT union, is no longer where the action is. However one feels about this development, it has the force of sheer fact. If this is true in France, the nation within the capitalist core where unions have best withstood the long decline of the labor movement, it should tell us quite a bit about where political struggle will be found in the postindustrial world over the next decades. That's what time it is.

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